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12. Failure to Hive

A Co-narrated Story of a Failed Social Co-operative from the Hungarian Countryside

Éva Mihalovics and Zsüli Fehér¹



Fig. 1. Sunset in Nagypatak. Photograph by Lujza Nényei (2016).

My co-author Zsüli and I both believe that telling a story of and from the ‘ground’ is important. She sees this book chapter as a way to convey her ideas to new audiences, and to make them heard.² I see this story

1 Apart from ERSTE SEEDS and BADUR Foundation, Lujza Nényei, and me, all names of people and places are pseudonyms.

2 We plan to share this text with ERSTE SEEDS, Badur Foundation, and Zsüli’s mentor as well.

as one that shows how much people's lives, and the decisions that they can make about their lives, are embedded in and defined by broader social and (onto)epistemic contexts (see Blaser, 2010; Koobak and Marling, 2014; Tlostanova, 2015, etc.). I approach this story not as a case study, but as a personal piece of situated and partial truth (Haraway 1988), translated³ and filtered into the situated and partial knowledge production of academia on rural Hungary.

The structure of the chapter is rather unconventional as we present our narratives side-by-side: I give my interpretation of events and issues along with the story of rural development that Zsüli shares.

Zsüli does not speak English and does not "speak academia". I certainly don't speak the realities of Nagypatak as she does. At the end of the day, co-authoring this chapter means that I am the one with the opportunity and responsibility to translate someone's life into an academic text; to give an interpretation of her story. This inherent power imbalance comes with potential tensions and conflicts: co-authoring is not easy. To overcome at least some of these difficulties, Zsüli and I chose to write our chapter in a rather conversational style, bringing the academic and the everyday registers closer together. After several discussions in person, we moved online. Zsüli wrote the parts of the story that she found the most important, which I then translated and asked questions about. We have not agreed on everything, and we interpret certain events and issues differently. We have decided to leave these non-agreements, questions, hesitations, and even frustrations in the text, as if we were just talking. Talking about life.

To start our story, we need to locate Zsüli's tiny home village, Nagypatak, in contemporary Hungary. Nagypatak, with about 360 inhabitants, is situated by a river, under the Zemplén Mountains, in the north-eastern part of the country. This region is one of the twenty poorest in the EU (Eurostat, 2017), and the majority of people living in deep poverty there are Roma.

From 2010, Hungary has become an electoral autocracy (Ágh, 2015), or as Prime Minister Viktor Orbán referred to his own right-wing, populist regime in 2014, an "illiberal democracy" (for details see Bánkúti et al., 2012; Fekete, 2016; Bozóki and Hegedűs, 2018; and Chapter 1,

3 The decision to write the chapter in this form was inspired by decolonial and feminist authors such as Richa Nagar (2014) and Marisol de la Cadena (2015).

Kovács and Pataki). The realisation of this ‘illiberal’ democracy has been accompanied by the experience of near-constant attacks against the ‘leftist liberal elite’ by official and unofficially aligned government spokespeople and sources. This ‘leftist’ elite of Hungary has included the (internationally funded) NGO sector, academia and any independent media that has not been taken over by the Orbán regime’s propaganda enterprises.

The government regime also states that its society is to be work-based and categorises its citizens as either deserving or undeserving (see Gans, 1993). Instead of granting broad welfare measures, it introduced a so-called public work scheme (*közmunka*). The slogan is “we provide work instead of social benefit” (*‘segély helyett munkát adunk’*; see Csobai, 2020). This means that particularly in disadvantaged regions, often the only employer is the local municipality, which employs locals for shorter or longer periods⁴ in *közmunka* (for more detail and critique of *közmunka* see Szőke, 2015). Nagypatak is one of the settlements where there are essentially no other options available for stable, wage-labour employment other than *közmunka*.

Entering the Story

I first met Zsüli when I was volunteering for an NGO mainly working with children and families in Nagypatak. During those months, I was trying to find my place and role in the NGO and ended up helping out at their social enterprise project, a guesthouse, which had opened only a year before. Zsüli’s kids were involved in the children’s programme of the organisation, and Zsüli, with other members of her family, was also helping around the guesthouse.

This NGO is the initiative (or mission) of a devoted social worker from Budapest; while looking for disadvantaged places that needed some form of help, he found the village and its people suitable for a long-term project. The NGO, and its programme, is only one of the four or five empowerment, development, and integration projects that I witnessed while working in the village as a volunteer, and later when

4 The contracts are typically for three months. Apart from the available budget, the extension many times depends on the benevolence of the local mayor or the social capital of the *közmunkás*.

I returned as a social researcher. The initiatives I know of are either NGO projects, just like the one I had been volunteering for, or run by big charity organisations, or by the municipality. Many times, I felt that this region and the tiny village of Nagypatak, despite being one of the twenty poorest of the EU, is ‘overproject-ed’ or ‘over-helped’. The question emerges: what could justify running several similar programmes in a settlement with only 360 inhabitants? Working with the same children, the same families? Whose interests do these projects serve? And what happens to locals’ initiatives?

For me, Zsüli’s story is partially about how local ideas are shaped, transformed, and even hijacked or exploited by the structure of the organisations and the funding system aiming to achieve ‘development’. Several authors have pointed out the problematic nature of the development paradigm,⁵ and in the Hungarian context Imre Kovách (2013) has written about it at length. As he claims, projects and programmes targeting the countryside often serve the interests and provide income for the members of the ‘project-class’, who are mainly middle-class, educated, white-collar intellectuals. I do not question the benevolence and good intentions of experts and project-professionals working in these rural development programmes, but I agree with Kovách that, instead of solving problems, these intermediaries tend to reproduce inequalities, often in different forms.

About Beginnings

Zsüli: It was around October 2014 when my husband decided to run for mayor of our small village, Nagypatak. At home, we talked a lot and came up with various ideas about how we could help the villagers to maintain a better quality of life. We were thinking about starting a civil association, foundation or something like that. Then my husband met someone who suggested that we try to start a social co-operative. We looked it up, and after several discussions with friends in the village, we decided that we had found what we were looking for. This form of enterprise has a social impact, and we believed that to be absolutely

5 Among others see Asher and Wainwright, 2019; Eija, 2016; Ferguson, 1990; Howell and Pierce, 2001; Li, 2007; McEwan, 2018; Mosse, 2005, etc.



Fig. 2. Reed Stacks by the village. One of the local social enterprise ideas was to potentially use this abundant natural reed for weaving baskets or furniture. Photograph by Lujza Nényei (2016).

important. There were also other aspects which we didn't know about, to begin with, whose significance became evident later on.

But back in 2014 we were enthusiastic, and we felt that this was a good idea. If my husband won the election and became the mayor, a social co-operative could help to improve the lives of the locals. If he didn't win, we could still work on that improvement. It was already clear in those days that the government wanted to decrease the number of people employed in *közmunka* and that small settlements, villages and towns were going to lose governmental funding. Now, five years later, I can see that our line of thinking was right. After finding the right path there followed a period that I now call the 'times of daydreaming'. We searched for information and talked a lot, as well as holding a lot of meetings with the small group of locals who joined us.

Those days it was only us, and no-one from outside the village, no-one from outside of our world. There was me, my husband and other people from Nagypatak. The people joining us were Roma, living in poverty with their families, and both me and my husband thought that we should, and that we could, do something to give them an opportunity to get a decent salary, a stable existence.

I think we had a lot of really good ideas. For instance, since we have a beautiful but sometimes dangerous river in the village, we were thinking about offering help to the municipality with flood control and prevention works. Then we had this idea of helping with the communal waste management. Then since there are a lot of reeds outside the village—remember, there's a river there—we had this idea of manufacturing furniture from it, or at first just baskets. I admit that maybe we were naïve at some points, but we had lots of ideas and we felt that we had the energy.

The fact that we didn't have any money to invest didn't bother us at that point. Somehow, we had trust in the system—we thought that if we had a truly good idea, we could apply for funding—and then nothing could stop us. None of us had any entrepreneurial or leadership experience but we were sure that we would be able to do this. Then came the day of the mayoral election and my husband lost by very few votes. This was a bit depressing, and we had to adjust our plans since we were sure that the re-elected mayor of the village would not want to cooperate with us. Then only a few weeks later in November 2014, with the help of a very nice lawyer, we officially founded our social co-operative. We had eight members, and I was elected as the chair of the co-operative.

Later, in March 2015 we received wonderful news: we had won a grant from the regional Job Centre. We were very motivated and began the work immediately. The idea with which we won was to cultivate a big enough plot in the village to grow vegetables and herbs. My family has a very large plot, running down to the riverbank, so we thought we could begin by cultivating that piece of land and, if it worked, continue with the gardens and plots of the other members of the co-operative. I'm very passionate about gardening, about growing our own vegetables and everything else we can, and I'm especially passionate about herbs. To be honest, I don't particularly enjoy hoeing during awfully hot summer days... but I love to watch plants grow. And I love picking herbs in the wild. That year I was on childcare allowance with my smallest, and the rest of the group were either early school leavers or out of employment, even *közmunka* (public work scheme). If I remember well, only my husband was employed. The grant was exactly for people like my colleagues in the co-operative, people with only a primary school education, or not even that. In a way, I'm one among them, for I only

completed the 8th grade.⁶ But I'm very curious and I like learning. I feel that not getting a high-school diploma was a big mistake, and I regret it. To tell the truth, I still haven't given up on the idea of going back to school to get that diploma.

Éva: After a few meetings in person at Zsüli's home and talking through the story of the co-operative I moved back to my hometown. During those weeks we decided to continue working on the book chapter separately, each of us thinking through and writing our own parts and bits of the story. Then Zsüli wrote her parts and shared them with me in an online document. After that there came a lot of phone conversations, which mainly involved me asking Zsüli "when you write xyz, do you mean yzy?", "Is it OK if I translate your words like this?" and "It seems that we won't agree on this, but I want to add my interpretation as well. So here it goes....". When dealing with this exact part of our text, I had several questions and a few conundrums.

One was about the fact that the social co-operative's members wanted to earn money: they wanted some form of employment, and it seemed that the ideal working life imagined by them involved earning wage labour. I asked Zsüli if they had considered working in a '*kaláka*'⁷ as an option for helping each other. This would be understood as a local version of a community or solidarity economy (cf. Mihály 2017, Miller 2009 or Gibson 2009, Gibson and Graham 2013), with members cultivating their plots, growing vegetables, fruits, and herbs together, for the benefit of everyone. And Zsüli said that no, they were interested in making money, in starting a 'real' economic enterprise and in providing education and (later) income for the members of the co-operative. This made me wonder why people living literally from the soil would prefer wage labour to liberating themselves from the dependency cycles of the 'real' economy?

There's an aspect to this conundrum that I want to discuss in detail. On the surface, this could be a story of neoliberal-capitalist

6 Final year of the primary school in Hungary. (Note by Éva.)

7 A '*kaláka*' was a popular and informal circle of mutual help during the years of state socialism. A typical example was building one's house as a group effort, everyone participating in the process. Then the next time a different member of the circle would receive help from the *kaláka*. This version of mutual help is similar to the Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) concept (see Mihály 2017 or Sík 1988).

entrepreneurial thinking, where land and labour are resources for doing business, for a profit. But from another perspective, I claim that at the centre of this story—as we tell it—we see the harmful effects not of capitalism on the rural imagination, but of class and ethnic relations, of social status, and of different concepts and understandings of work. In my interpretation, the development of project options for the social co-operative demonstrates how ethnicity (being Roma) is interpreted as a class issue (being poor) and as a social status issue (being under-educated, not knowing how to work or live ‘properly’).

I agree with Kovai (2016), who states that the assumed relationship of the Roma with the soil, with agriculture, is an accentuated site for reproducing hierarchical differentiation between Roma and ‘white Hungarian’ populations of rural areas. In Kovai’s (2012, 2016, 2017) and Horváth’s (2008, 2012) understanding, after the transition and its attendant economic and social changes, the previous spatial and thus social arrangements of the Hungarian countryside (which were not at all necessarily fair or pleasant) were disrupted. They discuss in detail how the ambition to eliminate segregated settlements, and to improve the housing conditions of Roma by moving them from the outskirts of villages to the centres, altered the perceived social and spatial structure of the villages. These authors connect this disruption of the differentiation between the ethnic minority of Roma and white Hungarians to the rise and strengthening of extreme right-wing, racist movements and groups.

After the transition in 1989, in Nagypatak there was also a phase of moving people from the ‘*cigány sor*’⁸ to the centre of the village. Additionally, I have found that the 2008 economic crisis and regime transition in 2010 under Orbán, with its introduction of the workfare-based scheme, had a similar effect on Zsüli and her husband’s thinking. Apart from finding solutions to poverty, the social co-operative provided a tool to maintain the social structures and thus their own higher social status in the village.

As Kovai writes, land cultivation plays a significant role in the maintenance of social status:

8 ‘Gypsy row’ — Hungarian term for the streets on the settlements’ outskirts where poor Roma people live in very bad conditions. There is usually no concrete paving the streets, and no public utilities such as sewage, water, or electricity in these areas.

the elite of the village, those in positions of power, including the civil actors, social workers and those employed [Roma] in day-labour, all seem to share the opinion that local Roma do not know the means and methods of agricultural production. But this isn't only a deficit of professional knowledge, rather, a lack of work ethics, which, in their opinion is fundamental either for the self-sustainability of the village or the capability of performing well in 'market'-based employment. In this concept, the Roma citizens of the village are the ones that need 'enabling' and education. This means that Roma are put in the inferior, to-be-disciplined position of a child (2016, p. 140)

When I asked Zsüli what their aim was with this programme, she said that apart from providing a stable income for the families, they wanted the participants (who were Roma) to adjust to the needs and practices of the labour market, to teach them effectively how they could "survive" in it. I argue that Zsüli and her husband's concern with the young Roma men not being able to follow a 'normal' daily schedule, that is, get up in time, go to work, produce effectively, and finish jobs on time, means that the co-operative's educational agenda should be analysed taking into account the broader social, class- and ethnicity-based relations in the settlement. I emphasise this aspect partially because I find within this a contradiction. Drawing from my decade-long field experiences, I believe that Roma people do know how to work, how to perform tough, physical jobs, and they don't lack a routine—but their daily routine can be different, and not recognisable to 'white Hungarians'. In this instance, we're talking about Roma people, whose families have been involved in agricultural day-labour (working mainly with raspberries and apricot) for years.⁹ Why would this not count as 'proper' job experience?

For development or empowerment projects targeting the countryside it is also crucial to have a nuanced, detailed, localised, and contextualised understanding of social arrangements and relations—and the changes imposed in these relations by the programmes themselves, so that they may be able to achieve their goals. Stepping into the process are white, middle-class, typically outsider actors, who usually undertake this intricate and complicated task with a lack of self-reflexivity regarding

9 Working on my Ph.D. project in the village, I learnt from the local Roma that many of them worked as seasonal day-labourers to support their families financially. This pattern fits into what several of the Hungarian literature described, see Hamar 2014, 2016 or Cseres-Gergely-Molnár 2014.

their own ethnic and class positionality and how these affect the body of the countryside. The ERSTE SEEDS and the Badur Foundation, explored below, are examples of the importance of such reflexivity.

Zsüli: The little group of six showed up every morning at eight o'clock, waiting for their list of tasks. They were motivated and in good spirits. After a few days, when we were cleaning the plot and preparing the soil for seeding, we got very bad news. It turned out that though the Job Centre was going to pay for the salary of the men for the first nine months, we had to pay the wages to start with, and it was only during the following month that they would reimburse our costs. The problem was that, as I said earlier, we didn't have any capital. Where would we get the wages from? And in this region, with all of these people being either unemployed or working in the *közmunka* programme, all of these people living in poverty... what were the Job Centres and the people leading the Job Centres thinking? How would we be able to pay wages—or, as a matter of fact, anything? Still, we were kind of lucky since we began working on the plot before signing the contract. Actually, I had to go to the regional centre, Miskolc, to talk to the regional Job Centre as the one in the small neighbouring town didn't give us the right information—and as there was no signed contract yet, we could just leave the programme. So, in the end we felt devastated, demotivated, and disappointed, but at least we didn't have to pay a fine. My husband and I decided to pay the workers from our own money—and we didn't have much.

When trying to find solutions, I got in contact with different NGOs that offered services for social enterprises (like NESsT), but I could not convince them to support us with 800-900 000 HUF, which would have made it possible to pay the workers at the end of the first month. Although they could not help us financially, they were interested in our project. I also made contact with the official governmental organisation for entrepreneurial initiatives (OFA). I found this type of networking very useful and was sure that with the help of these organisations, there was a future for the co-operative.

But in spite of those hopes, the whole experience was shocking and frustrating. When I had to tell the young men, our colleagues, that we could not pay them, could not honour their commitment, seeing them lose hope and trust... it was devastating. I find it incredibly sad that

organisations like ours face so many difficulties and obstacles when they want to improve the lives of locals.

NESsT, OFA, ERSTE SEEDS, BADUR Foundation... And a Marriage Falling Apart

Zsüli: Two years passed, and we still could not start any profitable economic activity. In addition, in 2015 my marriage began to fall apart. It was a very difficult time in my life, and after one and a half years of separation, we divorced. I was left completely alone with three underage kids and no help (my eldest was already financially independent and living on her own in a nearby town. I do have relatives in Nagypatak, but after my husband left us, he did not pay for anything for a period, and our income significantly decreased). Those were tough months mentally and emotionally. I wasn't sure about my abilities and capabilities anymore and also felt left alone with the social co-operative. The impression was that my partners in the enterprise didn't want to put any time or energy into the project, that they only wanted money. Money, and promptly at that. I was frustrated and lonely in a supposedly profitable economic organisation that had only cost money so far. The other members didn't seem to care—they were like ghosts. They didn't show up at meetings; they didn't answer my calls. I was close to giving up the co-operative.

Éva: This is another sad part of Zsüli's story. Left alone with three children, and with no financial help to buy the children clothes or to pay for winter fuelwood. These months Zsüli was employed by the municipality as a *közmunkás*, but her income wasn't enough to heat all the rooms of the house, so she and the children moved into one room. She was as strong and persistent as ever, but the failed gardening project, and the disappearance of members, broke her spirit. When talking through this period, I asked her if she thought that her being a single woman played any role in what was happening in and around the social co-operative. She said yes, because she had to learn how to convince men to take her seriously, how to work with them. Particularly after her husband left, this became even more difficult, or impossible. I interpret this to mean that her social status, because of her gender and changed

marital status, deteriorated, and this had consequences for the possible roles she was 'allowed' to take on in the village from this time onward.

Zsüli: The only person who tried to support me in finding new ways forward for the co-operative was my mentor from OFA, who said that there were upcoming grant applications that he thought we had a good chance of winning. He said that we could try and apply, and if we didn't succeed, I could still liquidate the co-operative. Then, in February 2017, this friend and mentor of mine invited me to participate at an informational event held by ERSTE SEEDS.

Up until that point I had no idea who they were or what they were doing. But the co-operative had so many ideas, some of them must have been good ones... so, after the event the two of us decided that we should pick one and write a proper business plan for it and apply to the ERSTE SEEDS social enterprise incubation programme. At some point my mentor asked me how I felt about bees. He knew a very successful beekeeper in a neighbouring village, a family enterprise. They were producing high quality honey, mainly for export. They even delivered to Japan. If I remember well, my mentor had helped them with the first steps of building their enterprise, and they had been in touch after as well. I didn't know anything about the 'little buzzies' but found the idea exciting. I knew that bees were important for us and the world to survive, and I was keen to participate in a project with them. We talked to several beekeepers in the area and it seemed that producing equipment and tools for them could be a winning idea. The two of us worked a lot on the application that we submitted. Then, I was kind of shocked in a positive way when we learnt that from 202 applications, ours was amongst the sixty-eight selected.

Éva: ERSTE SEEDS is a social enterprise incubation programme of Erste Bank, which has been running for several years in Hungary. The chosen initiatives and organisations participate in an eighteen-month process to learn how to build up an enterprise, interrogate what 'social' could mean in a social enterprise, learn about marketing and risk management, and gain the opportunity to build up a strong business plan. At the end of the process, the projects are evaluated, and the best ones receive money, and an opportunity to pitch their projects to real investors.

As I participated in the programme, I have first-hand experience of how ERSTE SEEDS handled questions (or rather problems) of



Fig. 3. A few of George's hives, the successful apiary enterprise in a neighbouring village. Photograph by Zsüli Fehér (2018).

distance and income during the training period. I found that despite their benevolent intentions, the inherent, unquestioned neoliberal-capitalist agenda of the programme led to a certain blindness and lack of knowledge of the realities of poverty in rural Hungary. I was present as a volunteer of the NGO running a social enterprise guesthouse in Nagypatak. The training took place in the capital, Budapest, once every month. As a white, middle-class 'visiting volunteer' of the NGO, living in the suburbs of the capital, I didn't face any problems attending the course. But I came to learn that both my local colleague from the guesthouse, who was a young mother, and Zsüli had troubles paying for the train ticket (a full price return ticket costs about 8000HUF, and Zsüli's monthly income was 131 000HUF), and since this was a whole day-long trip and programme, they also faced childcare difficulties. I asked the organisers whether they were planning to pay for the tickets, and they seemed a bit surprised. They told me that they had not anticipated that many participants from such far-away, rural areas. I asked if it was

possible to move at least some parts of the training closer to those far-away places that they had, after all, accepted applications from, and they said that they didn't think so. But, as a solution to the conundrum, they thought that they could reimburse a certain percentage of the travel costs for each participant. And this did happen. But reimbursement presumes that people had money to spend on the tickets to begin with, and that they would not miss this from their survival-oriented daily budget.

I was shocked to see how evidently the presence and ideas of higher-status and higher-income people already placed them at an advantage before the training had even begun. For me this suggests, apart from appropriating and reshaping local ideas and initiatives, that the system works in a spatially exclusionary way, narrowing down the chances of individuals from those faraway areas to participate, let alone 'catch up'.

I argue that this spatial determination and/or blindness of the bank's social responsibility programme should be analysed in connection with the strange structure of the Hungarian civil sector, which was captured by the intellectual elite of the capital city after the transition period (see Lomax, 1997; Hann, 1995). This means that there are many outreach programmes, initiatives planned and handled in the capital—and performed on the body of the countryside. Building on my field and volunteer experiences in the sector, I claim that scholarly knowledge production should investigate in detail the issues and assumptions around local-ness and grassroot-ness in the Hungarian context. It is important to find out who and how defines who and what counts as local and as grassroots in the Hungarian context? And with what agendas and interests in mind? For instance, from the four development projects that I am aware of which target the tiny village of Nagypatak, three were initiatives from the 'outside'. One of them was the mission of the social worker I was a volunteer for, and two others were run by an NGO and a big charity organisation where the programme leaders did not live in the village, nor even in the region, and only visited their 'worksites'. What I found perplexing was that these projects tended to see themselves as 'local', and one of them even claimed to be 'grassroots'. This latter project justified its self-definition with the fact that the organisation was

one of the ‘independent’, ‘progressive’ NGOs that found itself under attack from the government.

Thus, in their understanding, being outside of the financial and institutional regulatory and support system of the extreme right-wing government guaranteed a positive label or signified that they were of the ‘local’ and belonged to wider society. I strongly argue that from the side of NGOs this ‘myth of local-ness’ (my term), and the need to be defined and credited as ‘local’, should be analysed and contextualised through nuanced ethnographies, paying attention to the spatial aspects of the issue.¹⁰ I also argue that without an analysis of this kind, we won’t get a better understanding of why and how the countryside remained silent and indifferent when the government attacked the NGO sector.

When projects and programmes *are* initiated by local intellectual elites (as in Kovai’s example, by the mayor or, in other cases, by social workers and teachers), they do not pay attention to their own class, ethnicity, or gender, and the risks and consequences of these positionalities. How can initiatives of local elites, making decisions about projects, applying for funding then distributing the funding, claim that they build their enterprises on the basis of democratic decision-making and that they approach their beneficiaries as equal partners (see Mihály, 2019)? Pre-existing individual and broader relations, such as ethnic, class, gender, and other determinants of social status are involved in the complicated social context they aim to tackle. To be able to detect the “manipulation of the local elites” (Mosse, 2005: 5) and address the impact of such manipulation are key tasks for rural development projects.

What part do international donor organisations play in this issue? These donor organisations typically claim to assist the ‘thriving’ of local initiatives while being ignorant of or insensitive to local contexts such as ethnicity, class, etc., or the accessibility of their programmes, and tend to not recognise (or even to ignore) their own role in the constant reproduction of local hierarchies and inequalities.

I want to offer a way to approach this ‘spatial blindspot’. Decolonial scholars working on the realities of eastern European (semi)peripheries claim that this region serves as Europe’s inner ‘Other’ (or deploying Boatcă’s (2007) expression: Europe’s “pathological region”), and is

10 In the vein of the works of Forbes 1999, Howell and Pierce 2001, Butcher 2007, Leve 2207, Karim 2008, etc.

in constant need of development in order to catch up with the West. But these authors also claim that the region's societies' intellectual elite follow, by default, a Western neoliberal-development agenda which means that they effectively commit epistemic self-colonisation (cf. Tlostanova, 2015; Koobak and Marling, 2014; Kiossev, 1999; Meleg, 2006, etc.). To understand this tendency of self-colonisation, we must take into consideration that after the transition many of our intellectual elite were (and are) trained and educated (either formally, obtaining university degrees at Western universities, or informally, through training) and funded (through the NGO projects they work in) by the neoliberal West. Thus, I claim that our rural (semi)peripheries can be understood as targeted 'Others' of and for intellectual elites from the centre, who operationalise the 'myth of the local'—while remaining 'Others' to western Europeans, the EU, and international donor organisations.

Zsüli: At this point the social co-operative was mainly me and a young man from Nagypatak who participated in the training once or twice. But it was mainly me. During these months I learnt a lot. I learnt how difficult and complicated it is to run even a very simple and small business. It requires a lot of preparation and research. We had to think over a lot of things to find out if an idea made sense and was doable or not. I'd say that during these months I realised how naïve we were at the beginning. We didn't get any money in the end, and didn't find an investor, but I found it a great opportunity for networking—and built some true friendships as well. Now I feel that this was the best time of my social co-operative period.

In the end our co-operative and our idea of producing beekeeping equipment didn't make it to the final round, and nor did we get any money or meet an investor. So, my life went back to what I call 'normal'. Then, in spring 2018, it seemed that there was a chance of a breakthrough. My mentor did not forget the social co-operative, and he tried to find a way to help us. Or, at that point, to help me, as there were no other active members working or at least thinking about the future of the organisation. My mentor called with good news: he had shared

the story of the co-operative with the Badur Foundation,¹¹ and they had decided to support a pilot project of ours.



Fig. 4. Zsüli in gear working with the hives at George's apiary. Photograph by Zsüli Fehér (2018).

We talked through our options, and we thought that based on the lesson we had learnt from the ERSTE training, we would try something smaller, something easier. I was still in love with the little buzzies so a small

11 From amongst the organisations that play a significant role in Zsüli's story, OFA is a governmental body, ERSTE SEEDS is a social responsibility initiative of Erste Bank, and NESsT and Badur are international donor agencies, working in several countries, that finance 'local' development projects.

apiary enterprise seemed to be a nice and logical decision. We got money from the Badur Foundation to learn from the best apiary in the area, to buy a starter kit (hives and protective gear), and a few bee families. The final goal was still to produce apiary equipment and tools, because we were sure that it would be a good and profitable idea. I had to find new people to join the co-operative and participate in the project. Two people agreed to join me to learn about keeping the little buzzies. Once again, I felt lucky and motivated. George, the successful beekeeper who taught us, was a very good teacher. He explained and showed us everything in an easy-to-follow way. I learnt a lot really quickly. Beekeeping seemed to me a wonderful profession. Then early in the summer one of the two participants who joined said that she needed to quit because of mental problems. Then only a few weeks later the other new member left as well. I was disappointed and frustrated. I could not understand why these people didn't see beekeeping as a chance, why they didn't think about it and the co-operative the way I did. Once again, I was left alone, and I could not find anyone in the village who was interested either in this project or in the social co-operative. By October it was clear that this, again, was going to fail.

The End...

We sat down with the Badur Foundation to talk through the possibilities. I told them that I saw no chance of continuing. They were very nice and asked me to wait till February and to try and find new members for the co-operative. But by that time, I was through... I had talked to several people, tried to convince them, but I found no one who wanted to join the co-operative, to put in the effort, time, and yes, sometimes money, to build up a social enterprise. There was no energy or ambition left, I was tired physically, emotionally, and mentally as well. I was frustrated, disappointed, and to be honest, I felt betrayed by the people whom I had wanted to help gain a chance to live a better and more stable life, but who didn't show any interest. I got a letter from the Court of Company Registration, claiming that I had to modify the charter of the organisation, and that there should be new members joining the co-operative, either a municipality or a charity organisation. If we failed to follow these recommendations, the co-operative would be legally

terminated. I thought that this was the easiest way to get rid of the co-operative: by doing nothing. The Badur Foundation accepted my decision about giving up on the apiary project, and I transferred their money back.

Éva: I remember that I was already in Durham and checking on Zsüli by phone when she told me that she was about to close the apiary project, and shut down the whole co-operative. I understood her reasons, and in particular the fact that she didn't have more money, time, or energy to spend on the project. I also knew that winter was approaching again and that she had to prioritise the needs of her family.

On another level I felt frustrated, and even angry. Here was this persistent, hard-working woman, full of energy and ideas and despite all this, her life was not getting any better, and social enterprises and development projects could not help or solve her problems. I also felt that I, as a volunteer of that NGO, the NGO itself, the numerous projects in the village, the mentor and his approach, the funding and supporting system available for rural initiatives, government grants like the one provided by the Job Centre or the ERSTE incubation programme and the Badur Foundation's pilot-project—none of us necessarily 'helped' people living in the Hungarian countryside. Instead, though not intentionally, as part of the broader social and global structural violence (see Farmer 1996), we reproduced and maintained inequalities.

In my understanding the NGOs under attack from the right-wing populist Hungarian government and the international donors allocating their funding are all part of the same development arena. This arena is an imagined but at the same time real site of encounters for different parties with different interests, agendas, and realities. These differences are not necessarily the products of different cultures, practices or customs, but as Blaser (2009, 2010, 2014) points out, often they are the materialisations of different worlds around us—different ontologies and thus epistemologies.

For me, as a social science researcher, Zsüli and the co-operative's story is about different aspects of local-ness. First, I argue that development projects targeting the post-state-socialist countryside need to be aware of local ethnic, class, gender, and other potentially important relations and contexts, and, moreover, that all actors in the development arena need to be reflexive and accountable for their own roles in maintaining or

changing the status quo. Further, we need nuanced and detailed, long-term ethnographic accounts, localised-contextualised understandings of development projects targeting the Hungarian countryside, in the vein of the works of Tania Li (2007) or David Mosse (2005). Post-state-socialist rurality is a suitable site for deploying a decolonial lens, as such an approach allows the different ontologies at play between the NGO sector, donor agencies, and academic knowledge production circuits within these projects to become visible.

Part of my present task is to gain a deeper understanding of the ‘myth of local-ness’, how and why this label is deemed important and is enacted by different actors participating in development projects that target the Hungarian countryside. The leadership of the civil sector by the intellectual elite, and my field experiences and research, suggest that this leadership form has long-term consequences. It shapes, defines, and channels what counts as a promising ‘local’ idea (or ignores and denies initiatives that do not fit to its scheme). I claim that a critical and self-reflexive analysis of this agenda needs to be undertaken based on the experiences recounted above, exploring our potential epistemic self-violence within this system.

These are hard times for the leftist, progressive intellectual elite, its academia, and its NGOs. However, the volunteers of NGOs, and often we, those who produce knowledge on the Hungarian countryside, are as much a part of the problem as the solution.

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